

Briefing on the Situation in Abyei

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Tomorrow (24 November), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to hold a virtual meeting to receive a briefing on the situation in Abyei.

The Chairperson of the AU High Level Implementation (AUHIP) Panel Thabo Mbeki is expected to brief the Council. United Nations Interim Security Forces for Abyei (UNISFA) Force Commander may also provide a briefing. The representative of Sudan also as the Chair of Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and representative of South Sudan are scheduled to present. The UN Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa may also deliver a statement.

The meeting is taking place after the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) renewed the mandate of UNISFA for another six months. It would have been useful if the PSC meeting had taken place ahead of the mission's mandate renewal. This would have given the African members of the Security Council a clear guidance to reflect Africa's views and perspectives in the negotiation process.

Be that as it may, in light of the resolution adopted by the Security Council, the meeting of the AUPSC will be critical to pronounce itself on some of the salient issues. There is pressure particularly from the penholder underscoring the need for an exit strategy for UNISFA. Over the last couple of years, the US has been calling for a significant reduction of the UN peacekeeping budget and, hence, pushing for exit of some of the UN missions. What made the situation further complicated as far as UNISFA is concerned relates to the fact that the parties have not been able to make much of a progress

in terms of the political track. Although there have lately been positive developments in the bilateral relations between Sudan and South Sudan, this has not yet been translated into concrete action, particularly in terms of resolving the outstanding issues, including the final status of Abyei. Therefore, by insisting on the exit strategy, the Council and particularly the penholder, is trying to exert pressure on the parties to make progress.

There has indeed been increasing frustration that the parties have not made progress in establishing joint institutions as per their 2011 agreement. There is also disappointment over the delay in the deployment of UN police and denial of visas, the impasse in the appointment of a civilian Deputy Head of Mission. These issues need to be resolved to assist the mission in effectively carrying out its mandates. Every possible effort must also be made to capitalize on the positive momentum generated by the warm bilateral relations between Sudan and South Sudan.

No doubt, the mission cannot stay there indefinitely but it should also be understood that it is premature for the mission to withdraw at this stage. Since UNISFA has been deployed nine years ago, it has certainly contributed in stabilizing the Abyei Area. The mission, which is composed solely of Ethiopian peacekeepers has been recognized for effectively discharging its mandate, including the facilitation of peaceful migration, conflict prevention, mediation, and deterrence. A premature withdrawal without the resolution of the outstanding issues will have the risk of undermining the stability of the Abyei area and jeopardize the fragile transition processes in both Sudan and South Sudan. But then the issue is the parties will have to make tangible progress. The African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) working together the UN Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa is expected to intensify mediation efforts to encourage both Sudan and South Sudan to establish temporary administrative and security arrangements

for Abyei and to achieve a political solution for the status of Abyei. Some important work is expected to be done over the coming six months.

The UN Secretary-General is requested by the Security Council to hold a joint consultation with the governments of Sudan, South Sudan, and Ethiopia to discuss the exit strategy for UNISFA and develop options. He is also expected to report on engagement by the African Union and AUHIP on political mediation of the Abyei dispute and Sudan and South Sudan border issues, and recommendations on the most appropriate framework, structure or organizational mandate for the region to provide support to the parties that will enable further progress in these areas. Furthermore, the Security Council has expressed its intention to request an independent review of UNISFA in the context of recent political developments between and within Sudan and South Sudan and based on the outcomes of the above-mentioned joint consultation.

The expected outcome is a communiqué. The PSC may welcome the recent mandate renewal of UNISFA for the next six months. The PSC may deliberate on the exit strategy of the mission and chart out the way forward. It may call on the AU Commission for enhanced and continued support for the mediation efforts between Sudan and South Sudan.